

# The Crystal Forest: Notes on the Ontology of Amazonian Spirits

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*Ces citoyens infinitésimaux de cités mystérieuses...*

Gabriel Tarde

## INTRODUCTION

The ideas sketched out in this paper date back to my work with the Yawalapítí and Araweté in the 1970s and 1980s, where, like any ethnographer, I had to confront different indigenous notions about nonhuman agency and personhood. However, the event catalysing them in the here and now was my much more recent reading of a remarkable narrative issuing from another Amazonian culture. This was the exposition given by Davi Kopenawa, Yanomami thinker and political leader, to the anthropologist Bruce Albert apropos the *xapiripé*, the ‘animal ancestors’ or ‘shamanic spirits’ who interact with the shamans of his people (Kopenawa 2000; Kopenawa & Albert 2003). These texts are part of an ongoing dialogue between Kopenawa and Albert, in which the former presents Whites, in the person of his interlocutor-translator, with a detailed account of the world’s structure and history; a narrative which also doubles as an indignant and proud claim for the Yanomami people’s right to exist.<sup>1</sup> Here I shall transcribe the shorter version of the narrative, published in Portuguese in 2004.

### Xapiripé

The *xapiripé* spirits have danced for shamans since primordial times and so they continue to dance today. They look like human beings but they are as tiny as specks of sparkling dust. To be able to see them you must inhale the powder of the *yäkōanahi* tree many, many times. It takes as much time as Whites take to learn the design of their words. The *yäkōanahi* powder is the food of the spirits. Those who don’t ‘drink’ it remain with the eyes of ghosts and see nothing.

The *xapiripé* dance together on huge mirrors which descend from the sky. They are never dull like humans. They are always magnificent: their bodies painted with red annatto dye and enveloped in black designs, their heads covered with white vulture plumes, their bead armbands adorned with the feathers of parrots, piping guans and red macaws, their waists wrapped in toucan tails... Thousands

of them arrive to dance together, waving fresh palm fronds, letting out whoops of joy and singing without pause. Their paths look like spider-webs shining like moonlight and their plume ornaments sway gently to the rhythm of their steps. It thrills you to see how beautiful they are!

The spirits are so numerous because they are images of the animals of the forest. All those in the forest have an utupé image: those who walk on the ground, those who walk in the trees, those who have wings, those who live in the water... These are the images the shamans call and make descend to turn into xapiripé spirits. These images are the true centre, the true core of the forest beings. Common people cannot see them, only shamans. But they are not images of the animals we know today. They are images of the fathers of these animals, images of our ancestors.

In the first times, when the forest was still young, our ancestors were human with names of animals who ended up turning into game. These ones we shoot and eat today. But their images did not disappear and these are the ones who now dance for us as xapiripé spirits. These ancestors are truly ancient. They turned into game a long time ago but their ghosts dwell here still. They have animal names but they are invisible beings who never die. The epidemic of Whites may try to burn and eat them, but they never disappear. The mirrors keep sprouting time and again.

The Whites design their words because their thought is full of forgetting. We have kept the words of our ancestors inside us for a long time and we continue to pass them on to our children. Children, who know nothing of the spirits, hear the songs of the shamans and later want to see the spirits for themselves. This is how, despite being very ancient, the words of the xapiripé are always renewed. It is their words which augment our thoughts, which make us see and know things far away, the things of the ancients. This is our study, this is what teaches us to dream. And this is why someone who doesn't drink the breath of the spirits has short and murky thought; someone who isn't looked upon by the xapiripé doesn't dream – it just lies there like an axe left on the ground.

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This narrative by Kopenawa – and here I refer to both the text quoted above and the more developed French version titled ‘Les ancêtres animaux’ (Kopenawa & Albert 2003) – strikes me as a quite extraordinary document. Above all, it impresses with its richness and eloquence, qualities that derive from the decision of the two co-authors to implement a discursive strategy with great poetic-conceptual density. In this sense, we are presented with an ‘inventing of culture’ (*sensu* Wagner) which is also a masterpiece of ‘interethnic’ politics. If shamanism is essentially a cosmic diplomacy devoted to the translation between ontologically disparate points of view,<sup>2</sup> then Kopenawa’s discourse is not just a narrative on particular shamanic *contents* – namely, the spirits which the shamans make speak and act – it is a shamanic *form* in itself, an example of shamanism in

action, in which a shaman speaks about spirits to Whites and equally about Whites on the basis of spirits, and both these things through a White intermediary.<sup>3</sup>

But the narrative is just as exceptional for its cosmological exemplarity. It develops ideas that can be found in a more or less diffuse state in sundry other indigenous cultures of the region. It is this exemplarity which interests me in this paper, the aim of which is to call attention to some recurrent features of the mode of existence and manifestation of spirits in indigenous Amazonia. In particular, I take Kopenawa's discourse as expressing a pan-Amazonian conception in which the notions we translate as 'spirit' denote an ontological mode of the 'intensive virtual multiplicity' type.

### THE SHAMANIC PLANE OF IMMANENCE

Various prominent figures and central milieus from Yanomami cosmology can be found evoked in the above text: spirits, animals, shamans, the dead, whites; myths and dreams, drugs and festivals, hunt and forest. Let's begin with the *xapiripë* properly speaking. The word designates the *utupë*, image, vital principle, true interiority or essence (Kopenawa & Albert 2003: 72 n. 28) of the animals and other beings of the forest, and at the same time the immortal images of a first archaic humanity, composed of Yanomami with animal names that transformed into the animals of the present. But *xapiripë* also designates human shamans, and the expression 'to become a shaman' is a synonym of 'to become a spirit' (*xapiri-pru*). Shamans conceive themselves to be of the same nature as the auxiliary spirits brought to earth in their hallucinogenic trance. Thus the concept of *xapiripë* signals a complex interference, a chiastic distribution of identity and difference between the dimensions of 'animality' (*yaro pë*) and 'humanity' (*yanomae thëpë*). On one hand, animals possess an invisible essence distinct from their visible forms: the *xapiripë* are the 'true animals' – but are humanoid; that is, true animals do not appear very much like the animals which the *xapiripë*, literally, imagine. On the other hand, shamans are distinguished from other humans by being 'spirits', and moreover, 'fathers' of the spirits (who, for their part, are images of the 'fathers of animals'). Hence, the concept of *xapiripë*, less or rather than designating a class of distinct beings, intimates a region or moment of indiscernibility between the human and nonhuman (primarily but not exclusively the 'animals', a very problematic notion in Amazonian ontologies anyway): it announces a background molecular humanity, hidden by nonhuman molar forms, and speaks of the multiple nonhuman affects that must necessarily be captured by humans via the agency of shamans, since this is the stuff meaning is made of: 'it is the words of the *xapiripë* which augment our thoughts'.

The reverberation between the positions of shaman and spirit can be found in numerous Amazonian cultures. In the Upper Xingu, for example, the great shamans are called ‘spirits’ by laypeople, while they themselves refer to their associated spirits as ‘my shamans’ (Viveiros de Castro 2002a: 80–1). For the Ese Eja of Bolivian Amazonia, ‘all *eshawa* [spirits] are *eyamikekwa* [shamans], or rather, the *eyamikekwa* have the power of *eshawa*’ (Alexiades 1999: 226). Among the Ikpeng of the middle Xingu (Rodgers 2002), the term *pianom* designates shamans, their various auxiliary spirits, and the small, potentially self-intoxicating darts these spirits introduce into the abdomen of shamans and which function as the instrument of shamanism. This observation by Rodgers is important since it indicates that, if the concept of spirit essentially designates a population of molecular affects, an intensive multiplicity, then the same applies to the concept of shaman: ‘the shaman is a multiple being, a micro-population of shamanic agencies sheltered in one body’ (*ibid.* n. 18). So far from being a super-individual, a shaman – at least the ‘horizontal’ kind (Hugh-Jones 1996) more typical to the region – is a super-divided being: a federation of invisible agents among the Ikpeng, an anticipated corpse and potential cannibal victim among the Araweté (Viveiros de Castro 1992), a repeatedly perforated body among the Ese Eja (Alexiades 1999: 221). Additionally, if the shaman is effectively ‘different’, as the Ikpeng say (Rodgers *ibid.*), the fact remains this difference between them and laypeople is a question of degree, not nature. ‘Everyone who dreams has a bit of shaman’ say the Kagwahiv (Kracke 1987), in whose language, as in many others in Amazonia, the words we translate as ‘shaman’ do not designate something which one ‘is’, but something which one ‘has’ – an adjectival and relational disposition rather than a substantive attribute, something which can be intensely present in many nonhuman entities; which abounds, needless to say, in ‘spirits’; and which may even constitute itself as a generic potential of being (Campbell 1989). Hence the human ‘shaman’ is not a sacerdotal functionary, but someone more similar to the Socratic philosopher: if every individual capable of reasoning is a philosopher, a potential ‘friend of the concept’, likewise every individual capable of dreaming is a shaman, ‘a friend of the image’.<sup>4</sup> In the words of Kopenawa: ‘[This is] our study, this is what teaches us to dream. And this is why someone who doesn’t drink the breath of the spirits has short and murky thought; someone who isn’t looked upon by the *xapiripe* doesn’t dream – it just lies there like an axe left on the ground’. A shamanic critique of vigilant reason. In passing, note that if studious reason is the hallucination proper to Whites, then writing is their shamanism: ‘To be able to see them [the *xapiripe*] you must inhale the powder of the *yakōanahi* tree many, many times. It takes as much time as Whites take to learn the design of their words.’

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As is well known, a sizeable slice of Amazonian mythology deals with the causes and consequences of the species-specific embodiment of different agents, all of

them conceived to have originally partaken of a generalised unstable condition in which human and nonhuman features are indiscernibly mixed. All the beings peopling mythology display this ontological entanglement or cross-specific ambiguity, and this is precisely what makes them akin to shamans (and to spirits):

The Earth's present animals are not nearly as powerful as the originals, differing as much from them as ordinary humans are said to differ from shamans. [...] The First people lived just as shamans do today, in a polymorphous state ... After the withdrawal from the Earth, each of the First People became the 'Master' or *arache* of the species they engendered (Guss (1989: 52), on the Ye'kuana of Venezuela).

We can also cite S. Hugh-Jones (1979: 218) on the Barasana of the Vaupés: 'The shamans are the *He* people par excellence'; where the concept *He* designates the original state of the cosmos, returned to by humans by means of ritual. Discussing the Akuriyó of Suriname, F. Jara (1996: 92–4) observes that shamans – humans or animals, since nonhuman species have shamans of their own – are the only beings that 'retain the primitive characteristics from before the separation between humans and animals', especially the power of inter-specific mutation (and this is what 'power' is all about in indigenous Amazonia).

Thus the synchronic interference between humans and animals (more generally, nonhumans) expressed in the concepts of shaman and spirit possesses a fundamental diachronic dimension, reaching back to an absolute past in which the differences between species were 'still' to be actualised. Myth is a discourse about this moment:

[– 'What is a myth?'] – If you were to ask an American Indian it is extremely likely that he would answer: it is a story from the time when humans and animals did not distinguish themselves from one another. This definition seems to me to be very profound (Lévi-Strauss & Eribon 1988: 193).

The definition is indeed profound; so let's plunge a little deeper into it. I think mythic discourse can be defined as first and foremost a record of the process of actualisation of the present state of things out of a virtual pre-cosmological condition endowed with perfect *transparency* – a 'chaosmos' where the bodily and spiritual dimensions of beings did not as yet reciprocally eclipse each other. This pre-cosmos, very far from displaying any 'indifferentiation' or originary identification between humans and nonhumans, as is usually formulated, is pervaded by an *infinite* difference, albeit (or because) *internal* to each persona or agent, in contrast to the *finite* and *external* differences constituting the species and qualities of our contemporary world (Viveiros de Castro 2001). This explains the regime of 'metamorphosis', or qualitative multiplicity, proper to myth: the question of knowing whether the mythic jaguar, to pick an example, is a block of human affects in the shape of a jaguar or a block of feline affects in the shape of a human is in any rigorous sense undecidable, since mythic metamorphosis is an 'event' or a heterogenic 'becoming' (an intensive superposition of states), not a 'process' of 'change' (an extensive transposition of homogenic states). The

general line traced by mythic discourse describes the lamination of the pre-cosmological flows of indiscernibility as they enter the cosmological process: thereafter, the human and feline dimensions of jaguars (and humans) will function alternately as potential figures and ground to each other. The originary transparency or infinite *complicatio* where everything seeps into everything else bifurcates or explicates itself, from this point on, into a relative invisibility (human souls and animal spirits) and a relative opacity (the human body and the somatic animal ‘clothing’)<sup>5</sup> which determine the make-up of all present-day beings. Relative invisibility and opacity because reversible, and reversible since the ground of pre-cosmological virtuality is indestructible or inexhaustible. As Kopenawa said (2003: 73, 81) in speaking of the ‘*citoyens infinitésimaux*’ of the virtual arche-*polis*, the *xapiripé* ‘never disappear [...] their mirrors keep sprouting time and again [...] they are powerful and immortal.’

I just stated that pre-cosmological differences are infinite and internal, in contrast to the external finite differences between species. Here I am referring to the fact that the actants of origin myths are defined by their intrinsic capacity to be something else; in this sense, each mythic being differs infinitely from itself, given that it is posited by mythic discourse only to be substituted, that is, transformed. It is this self-difference which defines a spirit, and which makes all mythic beings into spirits too. The supposed indifferentiation between mythic subjects is a function of their radical irreducibility to fixed essences or identities, whether these are generic, specific, or individual (recalling here the detotalised or ‘disorganised’ bodies that thrive in myths). In sum, myth posits an ontological regime commanded by a fluent intensive difference which incides on each point of a heterogenic continuum, where transformation is anterior to form, relation is superior to terms, and interval is interior to being.<sup>6</sup> Every mythic being, being pure virtuality, ‘already was before’ what ‘it was going to be after’, and for this reason *is not* – since it does not remain being – anything actually determined. If the reader finds this a little too Deleuzian for her taste, let us then appeal to Lévi-Strauss:

Undoubtedly in mythic times humans were not distinguishable from animals; but among these undifferentiated beings who were set to give origin to the former and the latter, certain qualitative relations pre-existed the specificities still left in *virtual state* (1971: 526; my italics; also see Rodgers 2002: 103–4).

In counterpart, the extensive differences introduced by post-mythic speciation (*sensu lato*) – the celebrated transition from the ‘continuous’ to the ‘discrete’ which constitutes the meta-mytheme of the structuralist cosmology<sup>7</sup> – crystallise molar blocks of infinite internal identity (each species is internally homogenic, its members are identically and indifferently representative of the species as a whole) separated by quantifiable and measurable external intervals (the differences between species are finite systems of correlation, proportion and permutation of characters of the same type or order). The heterogenic continuum of the pre-cosmological world gives way, therefore, to a homogenic ‘*discretum*’,

where each being is only what it is, and is only what it is by not being what it is not. But spirits are testimony to the fact that not all virtualities were actualised, and that the mythical riverrun of fluent metamorphosis continues its turbulent course not too far below the surface discontinuities separating the types and species.

### HUMANS, ANIMALS, SPIRITS

As far as can be known, all Amazonian cultures possess concepts that describe beings analogous to the Yanomami *xapiripë*. In reality, the indigenous words we translate as ‘spirit’ generally correspond to a fundamentally heteroclitic and heterogenic ‘category’, which admits a number of subdivisions and internal contrasts (sometimes more radical than those opposing spirits to other types of beings). Staying with the Yanomami, the *xapiripë* or ‘shamanic spirits’ are only one species of the genus *yai thëpë*, which Albert translates as ‘invisible nonhuman beings’, a notion that also includes the spectres of the dead, *porepë*, and malefic beings called *në wäripë* (Kopenawa & Albert 2003: 68 n. 2). And although the *xapiripë* are epitomised by the images of the primordial humans-animals, Kopenawa makes it abundantly clear that shamans also mobilise, among others, the *xapiripë* images of thunder, lightning, rain, night, cannibal ancestors, pots, cotton, fire and Whites, as well as a motley crowd of *në wäripë* (*ibid*: 79–81). The *xapiripë* are not always beautiful and magnificent, since they can also be terrible and monstrous; and they share the ghostly condition of the dead, since they are ‘spectral forms’, that is, *images* (*ibid*: 73). The generic notion of ‘invisible nonhumans’ would seem to unify adequately enough the internal diversity of this ‘category’; yet the problem remains that these nonhumans possess fundamental human determinations, whether at the level of their basic corporeal form, or at the level of their intentional and agentive capacities. Furthermore, while these nonhumans are normally invisible to laypeople, to those who are awake and to those with ‘short and murky thought’, in the context of shamanic hallucination they are supremely visible, and visible in their *true* human form (they are ‘the true centre’ of the beings of the forest). Likewise, there are certain critical situations in which a person encounters a being that starts by letting itself be seen as human – in a dream, in a solitary encounter in the forest – but ends by revealing itself suddenly as nonhuman; in such cases, nonhumans are those supremely capable of assuming a *false* human form before true humans. In other words, while (normally) invisible, these nonhumans ‘are’ human; while (abnormally) visible, these humans ‘are’ nonhuman.<sup>8</sup>

And to complete the picture, we can note the somewhat paradoxical nature of an image that is at once non-iconic and non-visible. What defines spirits, in a certain sense, is the fact they index characteristic affects of the species of which they are the image without, for this very reason, appearing like the species of which they are the image. By the same token, what defines an ‘image’ is its

eminent visibility: an image is something-to-be-seen, it is the necessary objective correlative of a gaze, an exteriority which posits itself as the target of an intentionally aimed look; but the *xapiripé* are interior images, inaccessible to the empirical exercise of vision. Hence, they must be the object of a superior or transcendental exercise of this faculty: images that are as the *condition* of the species of which they are the image; active images, indexes which interpret us before we interpret them, images which *must see us in order for us to be able to see them* – ‘someone who isn’t looked upon by the *xapiripé* doesn’t dream, it just lies like an axe left on the ground’ – and images *through which* we see other images – ‘only shamans can see [spirits], after drinking *yäkoana* powder, since they turn into others and can now see spirits with equally spiritual eyes’ (Kopenawa & Albert 2003: 77).<sup>9</sup>

All told, this empirical non-iconicity and non-visibility seems to me to point to an important dimension of the spirits: they are non-representational images, ‘representatives’ that are not representations. ‘All beings of the forest have their own *utupé* image ... In your words, you would say they are the “*representantes*” [in Portuguese] of the animals’ (Kopenawa & Albert 2003: 72–3). Albert signals (*ibid.*: n. 29) that the term ‘*representante*’ is part of the habitual political vocabulary of indigenous leaders in Brazil. Introducing the idea of aniconic symbols as ‘representatives’ in his work *Art and Agency*, Alfred Gell (1998: 98) uses the example of the diplomat: ‘[T]he Chinese ambassador in London ... does not look like China, but in London, China looks like him.’ We can paraphrase this by saying the *xapiripé* do not look like animals, but in the mytho-shamanic context, animals do look like them.

Neither types, nor representations. What I am suggesting, in a nutshell, is that Amazonian concepts of ‘spirit’ do not designate a class or genus of nonhumans but a certain obscure vicinity between the human and nonhuman, a secret communication which rather than passing through the redundancy between them (their ‘community’), passes through their disparity (their ‘incommunty’):

One can say rather that a zone of indistinction, of indiscernability, of ambiguity, establishes itself between two terms, as if they had attained the point immediately preceding their respective differentiation: not a similitude, but a slippage, an extreme vicinity, an absolute contiguity; not a natural filiation, but a counter-natural alliance... (Deleuze 1993: 100).

We could say then that the *xapiripé* is the name of the disjunctive synthesis which connects-separates the actual and the virtual, the discrete and the continuous, the edible and the cannibal, the prey and the predator. In this sense, the *xapiripé* ‘are others’ in effect.<sup>10</sup> A spirit in Amazonia is less a thing than an image, less a term than a relation, less an object than an event, less a transcendent representative figure than a sign of the immanent universal background – the background that comes to the surface in shamanism, in dreams and in hallucinations, when the human and the nonhuman, the visible and invisible trade places.<sup>11</sup> An Amazonian ‘spirit’, in sum, is less a ‘spirit’ in opposition to an immaterial body than a

dynamic and intensive corporality, which, like Alice, never ceases to grow and shrink at the same time: a spirit is *less* than a body – the *xapiripé* are specks of dust, miniatures of humans with micro-penis and finger-less hands (Kopenawa & Albert 2003: 68)<sup>12</sup> – and *more* than a body – displaying a magnificent and sometimes terrifying appearance, superb body ornamentation, brilliance, perfume, beauty, overall an *excessive* character in relation to the species of which they are the image... (*ibid.* 73 n. 32). In sum, a constitutive transcorporeality, rather than a negation of corporeality: a spirit is something that only has *too little body* insofar as it possesses *too many bodies*, capable as it is of assuming different corporal forms. The interval between any two bodies rather than a non-body or no body.

But if Amazonian concepts of ‘spirit’ are not rigorously speaking taxonomic entities, but names of relations, movements and events, then it is probably just as improbable that notions such as ‘animal’ and ‘human’ are elements of a static typology of genuses of being or categorical macro-forms of an ‘ethnobiological’ classification. I’m led to imagine, on the contrary, a single cosmic domain of transductivity (Simondon 1995), a basal animic field within which the living, the dead, the Whites, the animals and the other ‘forest beings’, the anthropomorphic and teriognomic mythic personae, and the *xapiripé* shamanic images are only so many different intensive vibrations or modulations. The ‘human mode’ can be imagined, then, as the fundamental frequency of this animic field we can call meta-human – given that human form (internal and external) is the aperceptive reference of this domain, since every entity situated in a subject position perceives itself *sub specie humanitatis*<sup>13</sup> – living species and other natural kinds (including our own species) can be imagined to inhabit this field’s domain of visibility; while ‘spirits’, in contrast, can be imagined as vibrational modes or frequencies of the animic field found both below (granular tininess, diminutive size) and above (anomalism, excess) the perceptual limits of the naked, i.e. non-medicated, human eye.

## PERSPECTIVES

My reference to spirits and animals as implying a universal animic field of which they are the invisible and visible ‘modes’, respectively, of ‘vibration’ is not an entirely arbitrary visualist analogy. In fact, Kopenawa’s narrative speaks of the ‘ghostly eyes’ of non-shamans. Here the allusion is to the spectres of the dead (*porepē*), and the perspectival inversion between different ontological modulations of the meta-human – a key theme in Amerindian cosmologies (Viveiros de Castro 1998):

When the sun rises in the sky, the *xapiripé* sleep. As it starts to set towards dusk, for them the day is dawning. They therefore awaken all the innumerable beings in the forest. Our night is their day; while we sleep, they dance and enjoy themselves. And when they speak of us, they call us ‘the spectres’. In their eyes we appear as

ghosts, since we are similar to the latter. They tell us: ‘you are aliens and ghosts, since you die’ (Kopenawa & Albert 2003: 68).

The spirits see non-shamans in the form of spectres; likewise, the usual invisibility of spirits to the eyes of humans (non-shamans) is expressed by declaring that the latter possess ‘ghostly eyes’. (Whites, therefore, are all spectres, and always spectres, since they are supremely incapable of seeing spirits). Likewise, it is by ‘dying’ under the effect of the hallucinogenic drug *yākoana* that shamans are capable not only of seeing the spirits, but of seeing like the spirits (*ibid*: 68 n. 2, 84 n. 64): see, precisely, humans as spectres. In this sense, at least, shamans are dead, i.e. spectres, or at least humans who have ceased to be completely human: the Ikpeng, for example, conceive them as ‘ex-people’, *tenpano-piñ* (Rodgers 2002: 112). The *xapiripé* for their part share their spectral condition with the dead, from the ‘point of view’ of common humans: they are ‘spectres’.<sup>14</sup> As for animals, we have already seen how they see us – as their similars, but strange ones: animals who are at once ‘domestic’ ('house-dwellers') and cannibals.<sup>15</sup>

In sum, the spectres of the dead are, from the ontogenetic point of view, like animals in terms of phylogensis: both are ex-human, and both therefore are images of humans. It is not surprising, then, that as images defined by their disjunction from a human body, the dead are logically attracted to the bodies of animals; this is why to die is to transform into an animal, as so often happens in Amazonia. As a matter of fact, if the spirit of animals is conceived to have a human bodily form, it seems quite logical that the soul of humans may be conceived as having an animal body, or entering into one – in order to be eventually hunted and eaten by the living.<sup>16</sup>

All the above can be taken to mean that, in Amazonia, ‘the primary dialectics is one between seeing and eating’, in Mentore’s pithy formulation (1993: 29) apropos the Waiwai.<sup>17</sup> Amerindian cultures evince a strong visual bias of their own – one not to be confused with our own visualism (see Smith 1998; Ingold 2000). Vision is often the model of perception and knowledge (Mentore 1993; Alexiades 1999: 239; id. 2000; Surrales 2003); shamanism is laden with visual concepts (Chaumeil 1983; Gallois 1984–85; Roe 1990; Townsley 1993; Kelly 2003: 236); in most of Amazonia – the Yanomami are a case in point – hallucinogenic drugs are the basic instrument of shamanistic technology, being used as a kind of visual prosthesis. More generally, the distinction between the visible and the invisible seems to play a major role: ‘the fundamental distinction in Cashinahua ontology [is that] between visibility and invisibility’ (Lagrou 1998: 52; see also Kensinger 1995: 207; Gray 1996: 115, 177). We might also recall the strong emphasis on the decoration and exhibition of bodily and object surfaces as an epistemologically charged and ontologically efficacious process (see Gow 1999, 2001 for a comprehensive analysis of vision in an Amazonian culture).<sup>18</sup>

## THE SHINING CRYSTALS

My characterisation of the ontology of Amazonian spirits in a visual ‘key’ is not due only to the presence, in Kopenawa’s discourse, of the theme of perspectivism as a process of discrete switching of points of view between the different forms of agency populating the cosmos. On the contrary: the most important element in this discourse, it seems to me, is the functioning of a powerful intensive imagery of sparkling and luminous reflection, on one hand, and the indefinite divisibility-multiplication of spirits, on the other.

Firstly, light. Kopenawa’s narrative is literally constellated with references to light, brilliance, the stars and mirrors. In the version reproduced above, we see ‘sparkling dust’, we see ‘spider webs shining like moonlight’ and ‘huge mirrors’ which ‘always bud once more’. In the expanded version (Kopenawa & Albert 2003), the luminant *féerie* proliferate: over twelve pages, almost every other sentence features the *xapiripë* ‘shining like stars’, emitting a ‘blinding luminosity’, a ‘dazzling light’. They wave fresh palm leaves which ‘shine with an intense yellow’; their teeth are ‘immaculate and resplendent like glass’, or are ‘mirror fragments’. The ground above which they dance ‘shines with a glittering light’ and a ‘dazzling clarity’.

Hence the primordial quality associated with the perception of these spirits is their *luminous intensity*. This is an experience frequently described in Amazonia. The *Mai*, celestial cannibal spirits of the Araweté, are described with a profuse vocabulary of fiery sparkling and blinding lightning, while their body decoration is famed for its intense colour and luminosity (Viveiros de Castro 1992). The spirits of the Hoti, the ‘Masters of the Outside, or the Forest’, ‘are detected in the waking world in thunder and lightning, which are their shouts and the flashes of their lance-points, or sometimes they are seen, or heard, as jaguars. They are perceived in dreams as shining anthropomorphic beings, painted with bright red *onoto* [annatto] dye’ (Storrie 2003: 417). Like the Yanomami *xapiripë*, therefore, the Araweté *Mai* and the Hoti Masters ‘are never dull like humans; they are always magnificent: their bodies painted with red annatto dye and enveloped in black designs, their heads covered with white vulture plumes ...’

Undoubtedly much of this phenomenology of intense light can be associated with the biochemical effects of drugs (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1978). This, for example, is how the Piro describe the experience of ingesting *toé* (*Brugmansia* spp.): ‘[S]uddenly, everything lights up, as if the sun had risen...’ (Gow 2001: 136). Their ethnographer observes that ‘the metaphorisation of *toé* hallucinatory experience as “daylight” is common ... [o]ther informants emphasised the “redness” of [the] experience, “just like the world at dawn,” or, “at sunset” (*ibid*). But other drugs less violently hallucinogenic than the *toé* of the Piro and the *yākoana* of the Yanomami, such as tobacco, and other techniques of sensorial manipulation (cf., for example, Rodgers 2002), such as deliberate semi-blindness through the use of masks, the application of caustic eye-drops, immersion, sleep deprivation, and so on, may be involved in these processes of deterritorialising

sight. Moreover, the perceptive experience of luminous intensity is sought out by the shaman, not merely suffered (as a side-effect of drugs taken for other purposes), which strongly suggests that it possesses a conceptual value in itself. It is certainly not necessary to be a shaman to 'perceive' the relation between knowledge and illumination, a theme very likely to be found in all times and places; however, my impression is that, in the Amazonian case, this does not involve a conception of light as a distributor of relations of visibility-knowability across an extensive space (I'm thinking here of certain passages from *Les mots et les choses*) but of light as pure intensity, the intense and intensive core of reality which establishes inextensive distance between beings (i.e. their greater or lesser mutual capacity to become). The connection between this and the idea of the invisibility of spirits seems to me crucial: the normally invisible is also the abnormally luminous. The intense luminosity of spirits indicates the super-visible character of these beings, which are 'invisible' to the eye for the same reason light is – that is, by being the condition of the visible.

Among the Araweté, as probably for other peoples of Amazonia, luminosity and brilliance are associated with another visual quality, transparency or diaphanousness. *Ikuyaho*, 'translucency' or 'transparency' – but also 'outsideness', 'exteriority' (cf. the 'Masters of the Outside' of the Hoti) – is a state which shamans seek to attain via massive ingestion of tobacco (massive and 'mortal', since it induces a period of cataleptic shock). A state associated with the quality of 'lightness' (*wewe*), translucidity is produced by a separation between soul and body (i.e. by an exteriorisation of a being's being), which removes from the latter its 'weight' (*ipohi*) or its opacity ('the ordinary opacity of the human body' – Gow 2001: 135), thereby allowing the shaman to see through the body of his patients, and, more generally, to discern the invisible side of the world (Viveiros de Castro 1992: 131, 219–20; cf. also the 'shamanistic luminescence' of the Tukanoan *payé* in Reichel-Dolmatoff 1975: 77, 109). It was this concept of *ikuyaho* which led me to the image of originary pre-cosmological transparency developed above. The other source of this image is a marvellous proto-Leibnizian passage from Plotinus on the intelligible world, which seemed to me to share many a point of contact with Kopenawa's narrative:

for all is transparent, nothing dark, nothing resistant; every being is lucid to every other, in breadth and depth; light runs through light. And each of them contains all within itself, and at the same time sees all in every other, so that everywhere there is all, and all is all and each all, and infinite the glory. Each of them is great; the small is great; the sun, there, is all the stars; and every star, again, is all the stars and sun. While some one manner of being is dominant in each, all are mirrored in every other (*Enneads*, V, 8, 4).

'All' that is needed is to swap the molar and solar neo-Platonic metaphysics of the One for the indigenous metaphysics of stellar and molecular multiplicities.<sup>19</sup>

'Mirrors' are precisely the instrument of passage between the experiences of luminous intensity and the innumerability of spirits, that is, their quantitative

infinity. Mirrors multiply in Kopenawa's narrative, as the signs and means of transportation of the *xapiripë*:

The *xapiripë* descend to us perching on mirrors, which they keep suspended a little bit above the soil, without ever touching the ground. These mirrors come from their dwelling place in the bosom of the sky. In a shaman's house of spirits, these mirrors are placed, propped, hung, piled and lined up side by side. When the house is spacious, the mirrors are large, and as the number of spirits increases, the mirrors mount up one on top of the other. But the *xapiripë* don't mix with each other. The mirrors of the same spirits [regularly] succeed each other on the props of the house: thus there are the mirrors of warrior spirits, bird of prey spirits, and cicada spirits; the mirrors of thunder spirits, lightning spirits, and storm spirits. There are as many mirrors as there are spirits, they are truly innumerable, piled up out of sight. [...] Our life is no more than living among mirrors; [the shamans of the Yanomami know that] our forest belongs to the *xapiripë* and is made from their mirrors (*ibid*: 78–9).

Mirrors and crystals perform an important role throughout the Amazonian vocabulary of shamanism: the shamanic crystals of the Tukano and various Guyanese Carib groups come to mind, so too the 'crystal boxes of the gods' of the Piaroa, the *warua* mirrors which cover the Wayäpi shaman, and, more generally, the internal dual specular symmetry characteristic of the region's art and hallucinatory aesthetic (see Roe 1990; Overing 1985; Gallois 1996).<sup>20</sup>

Now, one may note that virtually all the examples given in this section – with the possible exception of Roe's remarks about specular symmetry, which deserve a discussion I cannot engage in here – do not emphasise the property mirrors have to iconically reproduce images, but, rather, their property to shine, glitter and dazzle. Amazonian supernatural 'mirrors' are not extensive representational devices, but intensive multipliers of luminous experience. Actually, the Yanomami word Bruce Albert translated as 'mirror' does not denote our 'iconophoric' mirrors. Commenting on a former version of the present paper, Albert kindly communicated to me the following crucial additional explanations of Davi Kopenawa, given to him in response to his questions about the shamanic-spiritual mirrors. This passage is a rewriting of what was published in 'Les ancêtres animaux':

'The *xapiripë* never move on the earth. They find it too dirty and full of excrement. The surface on which they dance resembles glass and shines with a brilliant light. It is formed of what our old people call mire kope or mire xipe. These are the *xapiripes*' objects, magnificent and glowing, transparent yet very solid. You might call them 'mirrors'. But they are not mirrors for looking at oneself, they are mirrors which shine'.<sup>21</sup>

Light not images. The *xapiripë* are indeed images (*utupë*), but their 'mirrors' do not constitute them as such – they are on the side of pure light.

## SIZE AND INTENSITY

Aside from their dazzling luminosity, the *xapiripé*, as percepts, display two other determining features, tiny-ness and innumerability. In the discourse transcribed at the beginning of this paper, we already saw that they ‘look like human beings but are as tiny as specks of sparkling dust [...] thousands of them arrive to dance together ... their paths look like spider webs ... The spirits are so numerous because they are images of the animals of the forest ...’ Naturally enough, in the expanded version, the number of times they are said to be ‘innumerable’ is proportionally greater. The narrator delights in enumerating this innumerable proliferation:

The images [of the *xapiripé*] are magnificent. Don’t think only a few of them exist. The *xapiripé* are truly very numerous. They never cease to arrive down here, countless and endless. They are the images of animals that inhabit the forest, with all their offspring, who descend one after the other. Are they not innumerable, all the cacique birds, the red and yellow macaws, the toucans, the herons, the trumpeter birds, the guans, the parakeets, the eagles, the bats, the vultures ... And then the tortoises, the armadillos, the tapirs, the deer, the ocelots, the jaguars, the agoutis, the peccaries and the spider monkeys, the howler monkeys, the capuchin monkeys, the sloths ... And then all the fish of the rivers, the electric eels, the piranhas, the *kurito* catfish, the stingrays and all the smaller fish? (Kopenawa & Albert 2003: 72)

Tiny, these spirits nonetheless evince an intense vitality (cf. the animals descending with all their offspring) and a superabundance of being: ‘when I was younger, I used to ask myself whether the *xapiripé* could die like humans. But today I know that, though tiny, they are powerful and immortal’ (*ibid*: 81).<sup>22</sup> Spirits are, literally, intense: the suffix *-ri* which generally accompanies the name of the *xapiripé* ‘denotes an extreme intensity, or a nonhuman/invisible quality’ (Albert in *ibid*: 73 n. 30). This is why, for example, the mythological animal ancestors and their latter-day shamanic images are *yaroripé*, that is, *yaro* (game) + *ri-* (excessive, supernatural) + *pé* (pluraliser). Intensity, exemplarity, alterity in relation to the merely existent:

the *iro* howler monkey we shoot in the trees is other than its image, which the shaman makes descend as *Irori*, the howler monkey spirit. These *utupé* images of game are truly very beautifully. [...] Compared to them, the animals of the forest are ugly. They only exist. They do nothing more than imitate their images; they are only the food of humans (*ibid*: 73).

The intensifier-spiritualiser *-ri* seems therefore to function exactly as the modifier – *kumā* in the Arawak languages of the Upper Xingu, which the Yawalapiti translated for me as ‘huge, other, ferocious, supernatural, alien’, and which I interpreted (Viveiros de Castro 2002a) as one of the basic conceptual operators of their culture, the operator of ‘ontological exponentiation’.

Interestingly, the dimensional imagery of the *kumā*-beings makes them larger, sometimes gigantic and monstrous, versions of the everyday beings: a Yawalapíti *kumā*-monkey is not minuscule like a Yanomami *Irori*. Yet we are faced, I think, with the ‘same’ monkey, or rather, with the *same other* of the monkey, among the Yawalapíti and the Yanomami alike. The tininess of the *xapiripē* spirits in no sense impedes their ‘excessive’ or ‘extremely intense’ character, as Albert says; on the contrary, it seems to me a decisive sign of the multiplicity designated by the concept of any spirit in particular. ‘When we utter the name of a *xapiripē*, it is not just one spirit that is evoked, but a multitude of similar spirits’ (*ibid*: 73). Spirits are quantitatively multiple, infinitely numerous; they are the ultimate molecular structure of the molar animal forms we see in the forest. Their smallness is a function of their infinitude and not the opposite. Likewise, the generally gigantic character of the Yawalapíti *kumā*-beings does not make them less invisible to the naked eye – and it determines them as qualitatively multiple, since a *kumā*-being is at once an archetype and a monster, model and excess, pure form and hybrid reverberation, beauty and ferocity in a single figure. In other words, the minuteness of the *xapiripē* emphasises their characterisation as a pack, band, multitude and swarm, while the gigantic nature of the *kumā*-beings points to the dimension of the *anomal*, the exceptional ‘representative’ of the species, the mega-individual indicating an animal multiplicity (Deleuze & Guattari 1980).<sup>23</sup> In sum, the tininess of the *xapiripē* and the frequently magnified character of the spirits (of the Masters of animals, for example) are like the front and back of a single idea, that of the ‘excessive’ intensity of spirits. Here we are faced with the two complementary extensive (spatial) schematisms of the idea that a spirit is an intensive and ‘anomalous’ multiplicity.<sup>24</sup>

By way of conclusion, let me just say that the problematic of the infinite in Amerindian cosmologies appears to me to retain a further problem for analysis. We have been used to contrasting the ‘closed world’ of the so-called primitives to the ‘infinite universe’ of us moderns, and to attributing to indigenous peoples a fundamentally finitary, combinatory and discretising outlook, which abhors the continuum as though it saw in it the dangerous labyrinthine path (the labyrinth of the continuum) which inexorably lures thought into the sinister empire of the non-senses. I am referring, obviously, to the structuralist *logos*,<sup>25</sup> which instructs us to think of difference exclusively in the ‘totemic’ mode of extensive difference, to conceive the movement of differentiation as a pure limitative synthesis of speciation, and to understand the real as a mere combinatory manifestation of the possible. But the molecular mirrors, innumerable images and countless spirits of Davi Kopenawa’s narratives strongly suggest that the properly infinitesimal, intensive, disjunctive and virtual component of Amerindian thought cries out for closer attention from anthropology.

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I thank my colleague and friend Bruce Albert for his generosity in allowing me vastly to cite, paraphrase, comment and otherwise cannibalise his magnificent translations and elucidations of Davi Kopenawa's conversations with him. And of course I am most grateful to Davi Kopenawa, a thinker any civilisation in the world should be proud to count in its ranks.

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>The complete dialogue between Kopenawa and Albert is due to be published shortly. In addition to the two fragments cited above, see the various other texts by Kopenawa and Albert in Albert & Chandès 2003, as well as two seminal articles by Albert (1988, 1993).

<sup>2</sup>Viveiros de Castro 1998; Carneiro da Cunha 1998

<sup>3</sup>See Albert 1993 for an insightful analysis of Kopenawa's discourse as 'a shamanic critique of the political economy of nature'.

<sup>4</sup>For the contrast between the shaman and the priest in Amazonia, see Hugh-Jones 1996b and Viveiros de Castro 2002b.

<sup>5</sup>On animal bodies as 'clothes', see Viveiros de Castro 1998.

<sup>6</sup>Compare this with the 'internal discontinuities' referred to in *Partial Connections* (Strathern 1991: xxiii).

<sup>7</sup>For a development of this theme in the context of mythology, see Lévi-Strauss 1964: 58–63, 286–7, 325–7; 1971: 417–21, 605. See too, of course, the excellent study by Schrempp 1992.

<sup>8</sup>Note that spirits are nonhumans, and not 'are not humans'. In other words, the extra-humanity of spirits is a case of ontological markedness (Valeri 2000: 28) in relation to the unmarked status of the human as the referential mode of being.

<sup>9</sup>See *ibid.*: n. 39, where Albert observes that a shaman can only see a spirit through the eyes of another spirit.

<sup>10</sup>'You call them "spirits", but they are others' (Kopenawa & Albert 2003: 68).

<sup>11</sup>[T]he statement that some nonhuman entity is "human" is the mark of a specific discourse, shamanry', writes Gow (2001: 67) apropos the Piro, while Urban (1996: 222) observes that the Shokleng art of dream interpretation 'consists in identifying a dream figure as a disguised spirit'.

<sup>12</sup>The imaginary of Amazonian spirits relishes constructing corporally deformed invisible species, with inverted members, nonexistent articulations, minuscule or gigantic appendices, atrophied sensorial interfaces, etc. A good example are the *abaisi* of the Pirahã (Gonçalves 2001: 177ff).

<sup>13</sup>See Viveiros de Castro 1998, and below, on Amerindian 'perspectivism'.

<sup>14</sup>'The expression *nē porepē*, "in spectral form" ... is often used as a synonym for *utupē*, shamanic image-essence' (Albert in Kopenawa & Albert 2003: 73 n. 33).

<sup>15</sup>Albert (in Kopenawa & Albert 2003: 68 n. 2) provides the following synthesis: 'Spirits see humans in the form of spectres, animals see them as their similars turned into "house dwellers", malefic beings consider them game animals ...., and the spectres of the dead seem them as abandoned kin.'

<sup>16</sup>On relations between the dead and animals, a wide range of examples can be found in:

Schwartzmann 1988: 268 (Panara); Vilaça 1992: 247–55 (Wari’); Turner 1995: 152 (Kayapó); Pollock 1985: 95 (Kulina); Gray 1996: 157–78, 178 (Arakmbut); Gow 2001: ch. 5 (Piro); Alexiades 1999: 134, 178 (Ese Ejá); Weiss 1972: 169 (Campa); Clastres 1968 (Aché).

<sup>17</sup>In other words, the raw and the cooked of Lévi-Strauss cannot be separated from the visible and the invisible of Merleau-Ponty.

<sup>18</sup>Among many other examples of the special implications between the exercise of vision and alimentary determinations, we can highlight: (1) Gow (2001: 139): ‘When I asked Piro people why they liked to take ayahuasca, they gave two characteristic replies. Firstly, they said it was good to vomit, and that ayahuasca cleansed the body of the residues of game that had been eaten ... These accumulate over time, causing a generalised malaise and tiredness, and eventually a desire to die. [Here compare: ‘The flesh of game we eat decomposes inside us. On the other hand, the bodies of the *xapiripé* contain no rotten meat ...’ – Kopenawa & Albert 2003: 85.]. Secondly, people told me that it was good to take ayahuasca because it makes you see: as one man put it, “You can see everything, everything”.’ (2) The observation by Alexiades (1999: 194) according to which the *edosikiana*, spirits of the Ese Ejá, are invisible to all humans except the shaman, since whosoever sees an *edosikiana* is devoured by it.

<sup>19</sup>There is a wealth of material in Lévi-Strauss’s *Origin of Table Manners* (1967: 115–16, 160, 227–8 *et passim*) that could be explored in this connection.

<sup>20</sup>See the Shipibo myth analysed by Peter Roe: the *chaiconi* spirits (Incas / brothers-in-law) “turned over the mirror” and so obscured the primordial human’s ability to see the game animals and fish they sought to catch in the crystal-clear waters of the lakes of beginning time. Now, since the mirror has been turned over to face its dull side to humans, they cannot see the animals they hunt ... except if they are near the surface [...] Since the shaman, via hallucinatory visions, can go back to beginning time, he will also be able to “turn over the mirror” and see clearly. Hence shamans are associated with mirrors and use them as accoutrement ...’ (Roe 1988: 120; 1990: 139–40 n. 12)

<sup>21</sup>Bruce Albert notes (pers.com.): In fact, manufactured mirrors are called *mirena* by the eastern Yanomami (*mire* by the western Yanomami), which is distinct (although it is formed from the same root (*mire-* = ?) from the term denoting the ‘mirrors’ of the spirits, *mirekope* or *mirexipe*. In another context, *mirexipe* is also used for banks of sand mixed with mica which shine in the clear water of the springs of the high lands in Yanomami territory. [...] Finally, *xi* signifies light, radiation, emanation’.

<sup>22</sup>These Yanomami ideas on the innumerability and immortality of animal spirits seem to me to have a profound relation with the question of the indefinite regeneration of species, famously discussed by Robert Brightman in relation to the Cree (Brightman 1993: ch. 9).

<sup>23</sup>The conceptual determination of spirits as multiplicities possesses fascinating sociological implications, which I lack the space to develop here. I shall simply cite what Gow says (2001: 148) about the essentially collective nature of the interactions with spirits: ‘When a shaman sings the song of a *kayigawlu* [the shamanic vision of a ‘powerful being’, i.e. a spirit], he becomes that *kayigawlu*, But ... the state of powerful beings is intrinsically multiple. ... [T]he imitation of the songs of powerful beings is less a form of possession ... than the entry into another sociality. [...] The other takes the shaman as part of its multiplicity ...’

<sup>24</sup>The complex oscillation between the ideas of minuteness and monstrosity as alternative expressions of an intensive multiplicity has been excellently described by Rodgers (2002) apropos the Ikpeng: ‘The potential to expand the minimal or obscure points of the world is

a distinctive trait of Ikpeng cosmological thought – small (*tikap*) beings, such as humming-birds, squirrels, bees or various tiny fish, being the most potent: all shamanic/*piat-pe'* (*ibid*: 100). And here is something that my colleague Tânia Stolze Lima (pers. comm.) found somewhere in Jacques Lizot apropos otters, according to a Yanomami myth: ‘Otters raise their heads [over the water] because they perceive the Yanomami as minuscule points’. Molecularity and (reverse) perspectivism in a single formula.

<sup>25</sup>Or, rather, its vulgate, since in the work of Lévi-Strauss himself things are much more complicated than that (Viveiros de Castro 2007).

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